

Battle of Seven Oaks (1816): Myths

The Battle of Seven Oaks took place on June 19, 1816; it was a culmination of the Pemman Wars and the escalating fur trade disputes between the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and the North West Company (NWC). This was actually an HBC and NWC war over pemman provisions. The late 1700s and early 1800s were marked by unstable weather on the plains, and war and disease was prevalent between all groups. After Mount Tambora volcano exploded in 1815, sunlight was blocked out and North America had what is called a "Volcanic Winter," and in 1816 was known as the "Year Without a Summer". In the winter of 1815-16, the HBC lost 50 men to famine in the Athabasca Territory – one-fifth of their staff. Between 1810 and 1811 there were 9 documented cases of famine cannibalism in the Nelson River district.

It was a massacre started by the Métis.

The Coltman Commission concluded:

- Before the battle it was not the intention of either party to engage in a fight.
- Persons of known talents and general information such as the Earl of Selkirk and Governor Semple should have known that their enforcement of the hunting and trading edicts showed "*a blameable carelessness as to consequences, on a subject likely to endanger both the peace of the country and the lives of individuals.*"
- On the killing of the wounded in Semple's party—Coltman noted that it was the custom of the Indians and Métis living on the plains to "refuse quarter to their conquered enemy." He found fault with the men he considered to be "civilized Half-Breeds" and said an equal degree of moral criminality must attach to those who collected together such a savage force for hostile purposes, meaning the NWC.

As proof that the Métis did not intend to harm the Selkirk Settlers, Lieutenant Coltman notes that they took some settlers prisoner so that they would not warn Semple that they were trying to sneak past Fort Douglas unobserved:

With regard to the prisoners taken before the action, it appears by the depositions of three of them, William Bannerman (No. 198), Alexander Murray (No. 199) and Alexander Sutherland (No. 200) that they were all at work upon their lands the evening the Half-Breeds arrived; Alexander and William Bannerman on their father's lot, No. 21, and Alexander Murray on his lot No. 23, and that these three, with Murray's wife, were made prisoners by the Half-Breeds as they went towards the Frog Plain, and Alexander Sutherland as they passed his lot, No. 12, on returning to meet the Governor's party; ...and said that they did not intend to kill the settlers, but wanted to get hold of the officers of the colony."¹

Upon completion of his investigation, William Coltman wrote to Cuthbert Grant, advising him to surrender:

¹ Coltman, op. cit., p. 187. William Bannerman was 18 when he arrived in Canada, Alexander Sutherland from Parish of Kildonan was 24 and Alexander Murray from Siragill was 19. They all sailed for Churchill in 1813 and went to Red River in the spring of 1814.

... as for the battle itself, it is always understood that the Colony people pursued you, or came forward to meet you and fired the first shot while Boucher was speaking to them. I consider this affair, as well as other violent deeds which took place, although as serious offences against the law, yet such may be pardoned...

It was a fight between the Métis and the Selkirk Settlers.

Contrary to what is generally believed, only three Selkirk Settlers were killed at the Battle of Seven Oaks. The vast majority of the men who participated were HBC fur trade employees or Irish and Scottish labourers who had been hired by Selkirk to oppose the NWC traders and to build the colony. In fact, all of the male Selkirk Settlers had been enrolled as HBC employees so that Selkirk could exercise greater control over them through the HBC Governor. Of the men killed in battle, seven were labourers from Ireland, three from the Orkneys, and five were from the north of Scotland. Historian John C. Jackson has pointed out that the Earl of Selkirk was interdicting the NWC trade route from Montreal plus placing imported staff against the NWC posts in the Qu'Appelle Valley:

These pretensions had taken a forceful bent in 1812 when the earl and his associates recruited and sent out what amounted to a gang of imported Irish toughs. Those brawlers were fully capable of answering the bully tactics of the Nor'westers in kind. Competition was escalating toward outright violence.²

Actual NWC participants were: 23 Métis, 10 French Canadians, 8 Chippewa and 2 Scots.

- Cuthbert Grant and 22 other Métis.
- Firman Boucher and nine other French Canadians.
- Chief Maug-e-gaw-bow and seven other Chippewa working for the NWC
- Two Scots.

Maug-e-gaw-bow (“Stepping Ahead” or “Starts to Stand”) was a signatory to the Fond du Lac Treaty of 1826.³ He has been described as a Chief long associated with the Northwest Company and resident at Leech Lake. He is also described as a Midewewin Medicine man. Maug-e-gaw-bow was accused of finishing off Semple.

Cuthbert Grant’s losses: Joseph Letendre *dit* Batoche, the 16 year-old⁴ son of Jean Baptiste “Okimawaskawikinam” Letendre and his wife Josephte (Cree), was killed. Joseph Trottier, the 26 year-old son of Andre Trottier and his wife Louise (Chippewa) was wounded with a broken leg.

² John C. Jackson, 2003: 22. The men from Glasgow came with Selkirk’s first party of 1811. The second group from Sligo, Ireland arrived on June 24, 1812, with Irish servants hired from western Ireland and led by Owen Keveny. Selkirk had been in Sligo in May of that year to see them depart.

³ Stepping Ahead was a delegate of one of the Pillager Bands at Crow Wing River. The first treaty of Fond du Lac in 1826 was signed by Lewis Cass and Thomas L. McKenny for the United States and representatives of the Ojibwe of Lake Superior and the Mississippi on August 5, 1826 and proclaimed on February 7, 1827.

⁴ Letendre was not the youngest in Grant’s party, Francois Deschamps was eleven years old. He was present with his father and two older brothers.

Actual HBC staff and settlers who were killed: 5 HBC Officers, 13 Irish and Scottish labourers and 3 Selkirk Settlers.

Of the Selkirk Settlers, two were officers, chief Settler Alexander MacLean (paid £ 50 per annum) and Reg Green a Selkirk Settler Sergeant.

On May 18, 1816, Grant and 49 men seized Sutherland, Pambrun and 22 HBC laborers from Qu'Appelle on the Qu'Appelle River rapids and take back 600 bags of pemmican. No men were killed. Of the 22 men released in Saskatchewan, nine fought at Seven Oaks, only three of these escaped with their lives.

They did not kill all of Semple's men at Seven Oaks:

Donald McCoy, Mike Kilkenny and Donald McKay who were released by Grant on the Qu'Appelle River, lived after their second encounter at Seven Oaks. HBC staff Michael Hayden and John Bourke lived as did George Sutherland a Selkirk Settler.

HBC Officers killed: Governor Semple (American), Captain Rogers, Dr. Wilkinson, Dr. White (both British) and Lieutenant. Einer Holte (Norwegian)

Outcome:

In reprisal Selkirk took Fort William and this so weakened the NWC that they had to agree to amalgamation with the HBC in 1821. The Métis suffered as a result since they closed half the trading posts and laid-off about half of the men.

Because many of the unemployed men came to Red River there was a great increase in population here.

As a result of the public relations prowess of Lord Selkirk, the HBC and Rev. George Bryce a founder of the Manitoba Historical Society and the University of Manitoba, the Métis have been much maligned over the following 190 years. It is only in the last decade or so that a more balanced picture of this battle has emerged.



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